Chapter 9
Revisiting the Role of Universities in Achieving MDGs

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Introduction

This chapter is an effort to look within the university education and suggest measures through which appropriate skill development and knowledge-based society could catalyze the achievement of Millennium Development Goals in Malaysia. Universities have played a strategic role in the economic and social development of the country and of the regions where they are located. The university is a relevant actor in the social system, in what concerns the development of human capital, through the supply of new professionals that have universalistic skills which provide a better identification of social and economic responsibilities (Goddard et al. 2006).

A university's most important contribution is education. Another important indirect role is to serve the public in providing the future direction of local technologies and communications. The importance of the public space role of the university and its contribution to local innovation performance is often underestimated. A key finding is that the university role in local innovation processes depends on what kind of industrial transformation is occurring in the local economy. Universities need a stronger awareness of the pathways along which local industries are developing and the innovation processes that are associated with those pathways. They should seek to align their own contributions with what is actually happening in the local economy. This strategic approach to local economic development is fully compatible with the pursuit of excellence in the university's traditional primary missions of education and research (Lester 2005).

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A. Singh et al. (eds.), *Millennium Development Goals and Community Initiatives in the Asia Pacific*, DOI 10.1007/978-81-322-0760-3_9, © Springer India 2013

In the era of knowledge-based, socioeconomic development is premised on the individual ability to manipulate information. The explosion of information and communication technology (ICT) in the late 1980s has sparked a new ray of human civilization. Similarly, the Internet technology has enlightened the human life, causing the outbreak of large-scale global information revolution. Millions of websites provide information in various fields of knowledge. Groups with Internet advantage will have access to a wealth of information.

The first concept considered when reflecting on the idea of the social impact caused by information and communication technologies (ICTs) is the digital divide. One perceives that these technologies are going to produce differences in the development opportunities of peoples and that a gap will be established between those with access to these technologies and those without.

Bridging Digital Divide

Digital divide is known as the disparity that having access or not to technologies produces in development. However, new digital divides are appearing as ICTs become integrated in social life. It no longer only has to deal with the problem of having access or not but rather with the differences that appear among those who are already connected. Not all those who have connection available have the possibilities to develop their capacities and skills for telework, for example. Once again, it is not because of the technology itself but because of conditions that are required to be a part of this new labor force, such as bilingual education, high technological skills, multicultural interaction capacities, and unstable conditions, plus the ability to work alone and take on greater responsibilities associated with telework, among others, which are costly and difficult to obtain and hence cannot be assumed by the majority of the "connected population."

Furthermore, for example, neither will all the local companies be able to take advantage of the benefits of online commercialization or be able to be incorporated in multinational productive networks. Yet again, it is not the technological aspect that restricts them but rather the economic, social, and cultural circumstances in which they are developing and the possibilities of developing capacities and transforming their productive processes. Besides, added to this reflection, one should also mention the large argument on intellectual property, where knowledge in the future is staked as a private or collective right that has the potential of opening new gaps related to access, usage, and production of knowledge and information traveling over the network. With the insertion of technologies in daily living, new digital divides will appear that refer to real usage possibilities, mainly in the middle class who, although have better access conditions than the popular classes, do not always have the resources to develop capacities and skills that allow them to use them to transform their current conditions.

Based on data from Pew Internet and American Life Project surveys, as reported by Lee Rainie (2006), there are nine persistent digital gaps identified. These gaps and the direction of inequality for each are shown in Table 9.1. Another recent statistics collected by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2008a) show that these

Table 9.1 Persistent gaps in the digital divide

Attribute showing a persistent digital gap	Direction of inequality
Age	Younger people use the Internet more and older people use the Internet less
Educational attainment	Higher levels of education correlate with higher levels of Internet use
Disability status	Persons with disabilities use the Internet less
Language preference	Internet usage is largely skewed toward English speakers
Race and ethnicity	White and Asian-Americans use the Internet more and African-Americans use the Internet less
Income	Higher income levels correlate with higher Internet use
Parental status	Households with younger children use the Internet more than households without members under the age of 18
Employment status	Internet use is highest among students and lowest among the retired and widows
Community type	Urban and suburban communities have higher rates of Internet use, and rural communities have lower rates

gaps still exist. For example, the survey shows that 75% of white American adults are online, but only 59% of African-American adults report using the Internet.

Internationally, the challenge of bridging the digital divide has now become the main agenda. Serious attention of the United Nations (UN) has been reflected in the conferences such as the World Summit on the Information Society. Current developments indicate that the information gap between developed countries and developing countries is very significant. This creates a new form of poverty – information poverty.

In line with this, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) declares the creation of a national framework in reducing the digital divides comprehensively. The findings of this project are also being used by the government of Malaysia as input to the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) and relevant agencies to draw up efforts to eliminate the digital divide in this country.

Malaysia understands the fact that the dominance of the multimedia sector is strength of a developed country. This is expressed in Vision 2020. This vision demands that the economy is driven by the power of thinking and skills of its community. In Malaysia, the government's role in reducing the digital divide is resolved with various efforts. Several ministries, government departments, and agencies strive to reduce this digital divide. The same attempt is also made by the public universities.

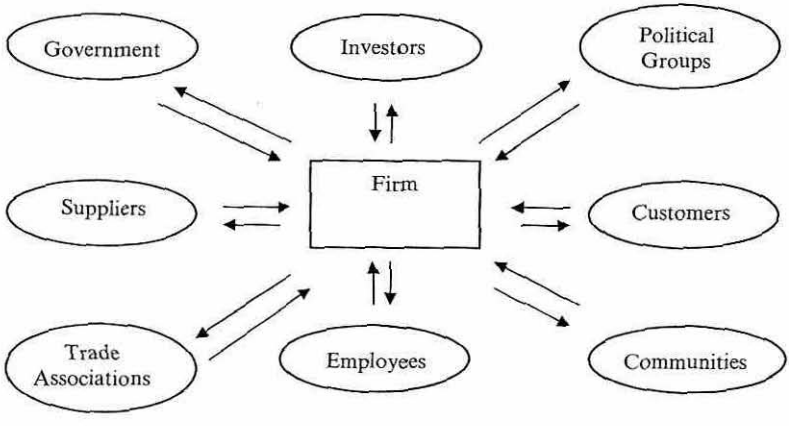
This chapter, therefore, attempts to explore Malaysia's public universities' role in helping its surrounding community. Particular attention will be given to strategic innovation programs that help foster the development of the community ICT development. Using stakeholder theory and corporate social responsibility's model as a framework of study, the study argues that public universities should move beyond its traditional mission of education and research and instead be more sensitive to and aware of the needs of its local community.

Research Framework

The Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theories have developed in number and type since the term stakeholder was first created in 1963. According to R. Edward Freeman, whose work in stakeholder theory is well known, the stakeholder concept was initially defined as including "those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist." As a part of management theory and practice, stakeholder theory assumes that managers who wish to maximize their firm's potential will take broader stakeholders' interests into account. This give rise to a number of studies on how managers, firms, and stakeholders do in fact work together.

Several views of stakeholder theory are presented in the literature though a key distinction can be drawn between the belief of stakeholder theory and the conventional input–output model of the firm which see firms as converting investor, supplier, and employee inputs into customer outputs (Donaldson and Preston 1995). In this theory, a particular firm is able to focus on prioritizing its interests while at the same time taking into consideration the legitimate interests of other stakeholders in which the firm is operating.



Source: Donaldson and Preston (1995)

The Corporate Social Responsibility Theory

Corporate social responsibility (CSR), also known as corporate responsibility, corporate conscience, corporate citizenship, responsible business, sustainable responsible business (SRB), or corporate social performance, is a form of corporate self-regulation integrated into a business model. Ideally, CSR policy would function as a built-in, self-regulating mechanism whereby business would monitor and ensure its supports to law, ethical standards, and international norms.

Numerous theoretical frameworks have been used to observe CSR. Friedman (1970) stated that engaging in CSR is symptomatic of an agency problem or a conflict between the interests of managers and shareholders. He claimed that managers use CSR as a means to further their own social, political, or career agendas at the expense of shareholders. According to this view, resources devoted to CSR would be more wisely used up, from a social perspective, on increasing firm efficiency. This theory has been tested empirically by Wright and Ferris (1997), who established that stock prices reacted negatively to announcements of divestment of assets in South Africa, which they interpreted as being consistent with agency theory. The agency theory perspective has been confronted by other researchers, such as Preston (1975) and Carroll (1979), who outline a corporate social performance (CSP) framework. In an influential paper on stakeholder theory, Freeman (1984) affirmed that firms have relationships with many constituent groups and that these stakeholders both affect and are affected by the actions of the firm. Stakeholder theory, which has emerged as the leading model in CSR, has evolved in several new and interesting ways. According to Donaldson and Preston (1995), three aspect of this theory – normative, instrumental, and descriptive – are "mutual supportive."

In Malaysia, many universities have responded to reinforce their stakeholder interest in CSR in a very positive way, by devoting additional resources to promote CSR. Other universities have less progressive view of stakeholder relevance. They avoid attempts to satisfy demand for CSR, because they believe that such efforts are inconsistent with profit maximization and the interests of the students, whom they perceive to be the most important stakeholder.

Creating Synergy Between Academia and Local Communities

Stakeholder theory underlines several entities that hold significant relationship with the academia. For example, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), political parties, suppliers, customers, parents, and the surrounding communities have a direct and indirect relationship with the academia. MOHE, for example, is the ministry responsible in establishing policies that chart the direction of higher education in Malaysia. It becomes the monitoring agency that guides universities to remain committed to the vision and mission of the ministry as well as the government.

On the other hand, universities also have a social obligation to help their surrounding communities. As propagated by the corporate social responsibility theory besides their educational mission, universities should also disseminate their expert knowledge to help the communities. There have been several instances where universities collaborate with the local communities to embark upon various efforts to help the communities. Specifically, programs such as IT awareness, extension service, digital storytelling, and training are among the programs organized by the universities to help the surrounding communities.

Creating IT Awareness

Universities have often organized program at various age groups to inculcate the importance of IT in day to day activities. For instance, school children between the ages of 7 until 12 have been invited to universities to experience hands-on application with the ICT.

Primary school children are introduced to basic computer operations, computer hardware and software, educational activities, online games, and also digital storytelling. For example, storytelling is an effective education technique used to educate the community. Often, education and moral stories are delivered verbally from one generation to another. The rapid development of information technology and communication may be the reason why this method of education is being forgotten now. Now, with the technology sophistication, this storytelling concept can be delivered in digital form. Digital storytelling could give a powerful effect and influence a broader audience. Digital storytelling is a combination of storytelling with technology. The mixture of picture, videos, animation, art work, audios, and music makes the digital work interesting and effective. Digital works that are creative and innovative could be an effective education medium.

Secondary school students are offered sessions on how to operate basic computer application such as word processor, spreadsheet, database, presentation software, and basic computer programming. Universities also invite full-time housewives who are mostly IT illiterate to basic IT skills such as operate basic Internet tools. In terms of adult working males, universities also offer tutorial programs to help this people with Internet application such as paying bill online, pay tax, and renew road tax.

Several training workshops were held aiming to provide an avenue for participating villages in sharing their experiences in implementing community telecenters for rural development and identify policies that can promote sustainability of the centers.

Enhancing the Entrepreneurial Skills

As an institution of higher education, universities have an abundance of business professors who specialize in marketing, accounting, strategic planning, investment, and taxation. Because of this, universities also extend its expertise to help the local entrepreneurs with critical business skills such as preparing working business proposals, balance sheet preparation, and marketing survival skills.

As an illustration, series of courses are designed for officials dealing with the policy, regulatory, and administrative aspects of the establishment and operation of universal service funds (USFs) as one of the means of providing universal service. Over attending a number of workshops, the participants would gain an understanding of universal service, including the establishment and administration of USFs, lessons learned from different countries, and issues and challenges facing USFs.

Most of the time, for participants who run their own business, universities will support them with a computerized accounting system for them to perform all the tedious financial record keeping and reporting needs, which are normally found in manual accounting system. It is a comprehensive accounting program specially designed to suit the size and nature of a business. It can be used alone or as part of an integrated system with other accounting and management program. Free trainings are available for those who are interested to learn the software.

Disseminating Information

Universities are also organizing conferences on rural ICT development annually to provide a platform for the academics, industry, and practitioner to discuss issues, concerns, and strategies to further promote ICT development in rural areas. Representatives for the surrounding communities have often been invited to share their experiences in dealing with a lack of ICT development in their communities. On a small skill, university is also organizing workshops to identify policies that can promote ICT awareness among people of rural communities. This workshop also becomes a training ground for community leaders to participate in formulating those policies. This bottom-up approach has proven to be the effective way of promoting a sustainable policy for rural ICT development. Among the successful outcome of the workshop includes the implementation of community telecenters for rural development.

On a bigger skill, conferences were organized to provide a platform for the academics, industries, and practitioners to discover, disseminate, and share knowledge and information on ICT for rural development. Seminars were also held to create uniformity to all participants, which plays a vital role in ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of the search, for instance, when natural disasters or accidents occur. Thus, identifying the issues and challenges as well as coordination of information is important to determine the distribution of manpower, equipment, and services that may be implemented as soon as the rescue operation begins. Apart from that, forums often served as a medium for the local community to discuss certain matters which involve the use of information and communication technologies. Among the issues are, for example, cyber bullying which currently is a form of bullying that is serious in the Internet.

Conclusion

Universities are required to share roles with government in the present era which needs cutting-edge skills to achieve MDGs. They should advance toward a strategic role in the economic and social development of the region where it is located. It is within this framework that every university has a social responsibility to promote and enhance the well-being of its surrounding communities.

The various ICT programs that enhance the synergistic relationship between the academia and local communities such as creating IT awareness, enhancing entrepreneur skills, and disseminating information have proven successful in bridging the digital divide in a local community. The programs have successfully uplifted the entrepreneurial skill of local entrepreneurs, increased the IT literacy among housewives, improved the knowledge of IT among school children, and finally increased the wide usage of IT application among working fathers.

More importantly, this collaborative effort has increased the accessibility of ICT among rural communities, strengthened e-governance and expanded the base of people's participation which would not have been possible without the active roles of academia. This accessibility is crucial to promote and enhance the quality of e-governance as required by the government to achieve MDGs underlined by the United Nations.

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